



TRANSFORMATIONS, PART III TRANSFORMING MY STORY

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Federal Way, WA
November 5, 2006*

There's a new movie opening this week called "Stranger than fiction." Have you seen the trailer for it? Will Ferrell plays an IRS auditor named Harold Crick, who thinks his life is meaningless. Then suddenly and inexplicably, he begins to hear the voice of a narrator in his head, describing his every move, just as he is about to do it. It turns out that he is somehow the main character in a novel that Emma Thompson's character is writing. Harold's life is the subject of her book. The only problem is, she has plans to kill him off in her book, so he somehow has to find her and convince her to change the plot. In the process of searching for her, Harold rediscovers his own life.

Director Marc Forster says, "This film is ultimately about waking up, it's about finding yourself, it's about what it means to live."

Kind of a lot to expect from a Will Ferrell movie, but that's the kind of transformation we're talking about with the Psalms – waking up, finding ourselves and finding what it means to live. And like Harold, we discover that we're part of a story. Our lives are part of something bigger than just a day to day existence.

Sometimes we're not all that thrilled with parts of our story. I have any number of embarrassing moments I wish weren't on the record of my life. Like the time I went to pick up a girl named Bobby Jo for a date. It was our first time going out, and her dad answered the door. I thought, "Okay...maybe her dad wanted to meet me before letting his daughter go anywhere with me." We went and sat down in the living room and I tried to keep the conversation going. After a while, her mom came in, and the three of us kept talking. I was feeling more awkward all the time. Finally, after what felt like forever, the dad asked, "Are you here to see Bobby Jo? Because she's not here." Turns out I had been stood up. Not one of my better moments. I wished I could have rewound the tape and skipped that little memory.

We've all got those episodes. Eventually, we can find the humor in them. We may not like those moments, but we get over them. But there are other moments in our story that aren't as easy to get over. Many times, the parts of our story that we wish we could forget are dark, sad or painful chapters. Sometimes there is stuff we hope nobody ever finds out. Sometimes we've done things that have left us with a blanket of shame we just can't seem to shake.

It's part of our story, part of our past. It's woven into the very fabric of our existence, and no matter how much we might wish we could wake up one morning and have it all be gone, it's always there.

What can God do with that? Can he really transform that part of me? And what would it look like if he did?

This past summer, in our study of the life of David, we looked at many events in his life that he would have liked to forget. That's what makes David so relatable – he was completely human. One page out of David's life that we talked about was his relationship with Bathsheba. David stole another man's wife, then had the other man killed to cover his tracks. It was a despicable thing to do.

We talked at length about the story as it is recorded in 2 Samuel, and we're not going to rehash it this morning. But separate from the story itself, we have a Psalm that is attributed to David after the fact. Psalm 51 gives us the words of a man dealing with God about his story. When David had been confronted by the prophet Nathan about his guilt, he saw himself as he was and immediately went to his knees. He deeply regretted his actions.

Scholars debate whether Psalm 51 is David's own writing or a tribute to him by later writers. Nothing in the Psalm refers to his specific sins. But that is really the beauty of this Psalm. It has become the universal prayer for anyone coming to grips with their own history. The path to transformation that it lays out for us is the same for everyone, no matter what your story may be.

Psalm 51:1-17

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.*

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.*

*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.

*Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Out of 150 Psalms, there are only 7 that are some sort of confession, the kind that say, “I’m baring my soul to you God.” Out of those 7, Psalm 51 is by far the most extensive of them all. In a detailed way, the author models for us how to come to God when we’ve messed up.

Do you ever get tired of messing up? I sure do. The message of repenting and confessing sins to God feels like one of the most familiar points of the Bible, but I seem to need it over and over again. When Martin Luther talked of this Psalm, he said, “I have sinned, I do sin and shall sin to the end of the chapter.”

We need Psalm 51 desperately, and we need it in two different ways. We need it for the process it lays out – How do we get back on track with God? And we need it for the transformations it describes. God not only forgives us for our past – he can take our past and reclaim it for his own use. That’s a powerful concept.

Let’s look first at the actual steps that the writer goes through.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

One of Annika’s favorite things to do these days is to stand on the stairs about five steps up and jump into my arms. She’s pretty trusting. She just throws herself at me and I better be ready to catch her.

The Process

We cry out.

The Psalm writer is throwing himself into the arms of God the Father here, trusting that God’s mercy will be there for him. Walter Brueggemann says, “This is the prayer of an empty-handed person.” There is nothing about the opening of the Psalm that suggests the writer thought he deserved anything from God. He completely acknowledges that any good coming out of this situation will be due to God’s nature, not his own.

We envision God as being like Santa. You know how it is with Santa: He keeps a naughty list and a nice list, and you’re supposed to convince him that you belong on the

nice list and that he should treat you well because of all the nice things you've done. You've earned a good Christmas present. You deserve it.

But there is no nice list with God. We resist the idea of letting God know how bad we really are, because we don't want him to think less of us. But we only experience his mercy and compassion when we stop trying to impress him and just cry out for his help.

Sometimes even when we know we've messed up badly, we want to be the ones to repair the damage before involving God. Tom Parks and I were talking this week about how guys in particular like to wait to discuss problems until they've had the chance to fix them. We want to clean up our own mess before we admit there was one. Eugene Peterson writes, "We keep looking for ways to improve our lives without dealing with God. But we can't do it."

So it starts with a helpless cry. We call out for God to show mercy, because we've got nowhere else to go. Once we're at that spot,

We confess.

When we confess we are essentially saying three things. First, **I own my actions**. The Psalm writer said this:

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

Knowing what we've done wrong and admitting it is central to confession. I like the way the American Heritage Dictionary defines the word. It says that to confess is "to disclose or acknowledge something that is damaging or inconvenient to oneself." It's this terribly unnatural act, because it goes against everything we've learned about looking out for ourselves.

Just this week, there was another scandal in the news involving a high profile pastor. Initially, he completely denied everything, and then of course later it turned out he was lying. Here's somebody who should know better than most people the importance of coming clean about sin. Here's somebody who should know that covering up only makes it worse. But he still couldn't bring himself to tell the truth. I don't care who you are or what you know in your head, confession is hard because it feels so humiliating and it seems like there is so much to lose.

If we do decide to ask God for forgiveness, we'd prefer to talk in general terms, "Lord I'm sorry all my sins." But true confession is owning up to specifics. "Lord forgive me for losing my temper there," "Forgive me for letting my pride get in the way," "Forgive me for not trusting you with this." To know our sins is to name them in particular. We don't try to downplay them or soft pedal them. The better we can articulate them, the more we own them and see them for what they are.

Secondly, when I confess, **I admit who I hit**.

*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.*

We normally view our sins in light of how they hurt other people. It's usually pretty easy to see. David's actions impacted the lives of Bathsheba, Uriah and his own family. There were some pretty serious consequences to his actions. But that's not the half of it. When I'm only considering how I have hurt other sinful people, I can always find some little corner to justify my actions. Ever since Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent for their choices in the Garden of Eden, humans have been trying to rope each other into our guilt. "He started it." "She pushed me first." We look for ways to say, "What I did isn't really so bad, because that other person isn't innocent either."

But sin isn't just against those around us – it's against God. And God is holy and perfect. There's no wiggle room when our actions are against him. There's no accusing him of wrong-doing. Karl Barth said "It is the righteousness of God that makes the reality of guilt so dismal."

It's very sobering to think that every time I do something wrong, it's as if I'm doing it to God himself. How can that be? It all goes back to Calvary. God paid such a heavy price for sin. Oswald Chambers says that when God comes to us, he comes "with grip of the pierced hand of his son." It cost everything to bring us forgiveness. When we intentionally sin in the face of what he has done, we are treating Christ's sacrifice as having no value.

Confession brings me face to face with how I am treating God. Only when I admit who I hit, when I see how my sin affects my relationship with my Heavenly Father, will I deal honestly with my own actions.

The Psalm continues and says this:

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

This is the third aspect of confession. Because when I confess, **I see who I be.**

In the movie Ice Age 2, the little creature called Scrat is trying to stick an acorn into a wall of ice, when a stream of water starts coming out the hole he made. He quickly plugs it with his finger. Soon another hole appears and water starts gushing out a second place. Before you know it, he has all four paws trying to block the water. Finally, another hole appears, and he has to cover it with his mouth. Of course, then he just starts to fill up with water until the whole wall of ice gives way and this torrent of water floods through.

We can try to stop individual sins. We might be able to knock back a bad habit or two for a while. But it's going to gush out somewhere else. Just below the surface, there's a much bigger sin problem happening.

My actions are not isolated. I have a systemic problem. It's been going on since before I was born. From the time I was in the womb I've had what's called "original sin." It's in my genes.

That's why it doesn't really matter if I've ever done anything as bad as what the Psalm writer did. His sins were just one particular hole where sin flowed through. It might come through somewhere else for me. But we're all dealing with the same torrent behind the wall.

I very clearly remember when I was in about 5th grade. I woke up in the middle of the night, sweating bullets, realizing that I had lied to my mom about something months earlier. The Holy Spirit was doing his work on my heart in a serious way, getting ahold of my conscience. I have heard grown adults describe being struck by their own sins in very similar terms. My little lie wasn't the biggest sin ever. There have been far more serious crimes in the world. But even then, I knew I was dealing with something important.

We get in the habit of comparing sin stories. It makes us feel better when we can look at somebody else and say, "Well at least I've never done anything THAT bad." But that sets us up to be judgmental, and it misses the point. The problem has to do with who we are – not just the things we've done.

It doesn't matter how old you are or how long your list of sins, whether you've told little white lies or great big fat ones, the remedy is always the same: Cry to God, confess what you've done, and realize in that confession that the problem is much deeper than whatever the act was – there's a knot in your soul only God can untie.

God not only can untie it – he wants to. The Psalm writer wrote:

Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

It is God's desire to clean us up. We've looked at the steps we take in the process to transform our stories. There are two additional steps that God takes, and cleaning is the first.

God cleans.

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.*

The word translated here as cleanse literally means, "unsin me." Scrub it out of me. The reference to hyssop is interesting here. Because priests would dip a branch of hyssop in blood and sprinkle it on someone when they were pronouncing them cured or "clean" of leprosy. Leprosy was a disease that left you wasting away. And it was highly infectious, so you had to be isolated. So being healed and cleansed of that disease was a huge cause

for celebration. Not only did it mean your physical survival – it meant you could be restored to the community.

One of my favorite scenes out of the life of Jesus is when he encountered a man with leprosy.

Mark 1:40-42

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.

The man asks Jesus if he is willing and Jesus says YES! Yes, that's what I want. And he does the incredible miracle of healing him.

We cry out to God and say, if you are willing, you can make me clean. And he is willing. And his cleaning of us stops what is making us waste away. It saves us from our isolation and lets us come back into true community with other people. God loves to clean us up.

The Psalm writer goes beyond that and asks God to do something else.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

God creates.

That word for create is the same one as God creating the world. In the entire Bible, it is reserved exclusively for God. He is the only one that can create on the level that it is talking about. He's the only one that can give us a brand new heart.

This is the goal of the whole process. We cry out to God for help, we tell him what it is that we've done, we ask him to clean us up and he does. Then he begins a new work in us. The God who formed Adam out of the dust can scoop up the dirt from our lives and do something wonderful with it. He is by nature a creative God, with the mind and the resources to always be inventing something new in us.

The Transformations

Here's where we start to see the transformation. Here's where our story takes on a new life and we begin to experience some changes. The first thing that happens is that

The weight of sin finally breaks the heart

Have you ever had a shelf like this – so full of books that it bends in the middle? I once had an entire bookshelf collapse because I put far more weight on it than it was intended to bear.

Our hearts sometimes bear far more of the weight of sin than they were designed for. It seems odd, but the transformation we're looking for is a broken heart – one that has finally collapsed and given way under the burden.

*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

I read that shepherds will watch a lamb that strays away from the group. If it does so on a regular basis, the shepherd will go find it and bring it back. Then he'll hold it with one arm, while at the same time positioning his staff against one of its legs. Then in a swift, strong motion, he will snap the lamb's leg with the staff.

Author Haddon Robinson explains why: "Back in the fold the shepherd makes a splint for the shattered leg and, during the days that follow, he carries that crippled sheep close to his heart. As the leg begins to mend, the shepherd sets the sheep down by his side. To the crippled animal, the smallest stream looms like a giant river, the tiniest knoll rises like a mountain. The sheep depends completely on the shepherd to carry it across the terrain. After the leg has healed, the sheep has learned a lesson: It must stay close to the shepherd's side.

"To break the leg of a poor, defenseless sheep seems almost vicious -- unless you understand the shepherd's heart. Then you realize that what seems to be cruelty is really kindness. The shepherd knows that the sheep must remain close to him if it is to be protected from danger. So he breaks the leg -- not to hurt it -- but to restore it."

I need to be clear that I'm not saying all brokenness in life is due to something we did wrong or even that God always is trying to teach us a lesson. We live in a fallen world that is twisted by sin, and we all hit trouble spots that aren't necessarily connected to anything we've done. Many of you are dealing with deep wounds that came even though you never wandered off. And God certainly has the power to work through them. But brokenness that comes when God deals with our sin can be a true gift, because like that sheep, it teaches us to stay us dependent on God.

We see another transformation, too, because

Pleas for mercy turn into praise for mercy

The Psalm writer says:

*Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.*

I love that – “Save me...O God, the God who saves me.” The result of that saving is praise to God. Cries of desperation are turned into cries of thankfulness.

If you haven't had a story that God has changed, your praise will be fairly hollow. But the more we have felt his mercy and grace in a personal way, the deeper and more meaningful our thanks to him will be. It won't just be words or ideas – it will be personal testimony.

Jesus himself said, “He who has been forgiven little, loves little.”

This is not to say that we should go commit bigger sins because it will make us appreciate God's forgiveness more. That takes us the wrong direction. The goal is to bring as much of our story as we possibly can to him. Whatever hurts we've caused, whatever pain we've felt, we can watch what he does to heal us up. It is seeing that that changes the story itself. We watch as he turns bad things into a cause for praise. The very things that once caused heartache can slowly become the point at which we most see God's work in our lives.

So with our hearts broken, we have a new cause to be dependent on God. With our darkest secrets forgiven, we have a new cause to praise God. Another transformation that occurs is that our

Pursuit of happiness changes to pursuit of joy

Sin always looks like a shortcut to happiness. It's a way to get to what we think we want quicker. Instantly. We lie, we cheat, we steal to reach that dangling carrot that's just out of grasp. Sometimes we actually grab hold of the carrot for a moment. Sin often has a temporary pay off that feels great. That's why it's so tempting, because when everything works according to our plan, it meets a need and fills a void in us.

But it never lasts. Eventually, whatever happiness we got from it wears off. The weight that we talked about earlier starts to press in. And we end up either needing to chase the happiness a little further, or turn around and head the other direction.

That's what creates the big misconception about confession and repentance, that it is a complete killjoy. After all, if you're turning away from something that makes you happy, it seems like the only option is that you must be turning toward something that makes you miserable.

Any time you see a character who is serious about their faith on TV or in the movies, they're always angry, repressed, and generally unhappy. The church lady was the classic stereotype of what people think Christianity teaches.

It's all a huge lie of the devil. I can't put it in any other terms. There's nothing the enemy would like more than to make us think that to cry out to God and turn from our sin means giving up all that's fun and enjoyable. Because it is actually the opposite.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice...Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

We inherited a toy kitchen from Julia Wittenberg, and along with it came a lot of toy food. I was pretty impressed by some of the food. It looks pretty realistic. The oranges are especially nice. But they're hollow plastic. You can't sink your teeth into them, and if you could, it wouldn't be very satisfying.

The difference between the happiness sin offers and the joy God holds out to us is like the difference between plastic fruit and real fruit. They may both look good, but only one has any substance to it. Only one will really prove satisfying.

To hand over our story to God isn't replacing happiness with misery – it is transforming a shallow experience of happiness for a long-lasting pursuit of joy – a pursuit that will be richer and truer than anything the world has to offer.

A final way our story is transformed is that our

Experience results in empathy

Look at these words again:

*Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.*

Our experience of God's grace in our own struggle translates into an ability to help other people with similar struggles.

G.K. Chesterton wrote a series of mystery stories back in the 1800s, and one of his detectives was a priest named Father Brown. He was an unlikely detective, and he had an unusual method of solving crimes. He would identify as completely as possible with the killer to understand them better.

"You see, I had murdered them all myself... I had planned out each of the crimes very carefully. I had thought out exactly how a thing like that could be done, and in what style or state of mind a man could really do it. And when I was quite sure that I felt exactly like the murderer myself, of course I knew who he was."

We are much better teachers of lessons we have learned ourselves. When we can identify with someone else's plight, then we aren't going to pass judgment on them. When we've been humbled and have had to accept grace, we'll be more likely to be gracious ourselves. Then and only then are we in a position to talk to other people about God's

ways. Only then will we be able to convincingly communicate God's compassion, because we will know it from the inside out.

When we allow God to have our past, when we don't shut it down and run from it in shame, he can turn it into a powerful way to help other people. God doesn't want to just save you from your past – he wants to take that past and show you something incredible.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

He has made everything beautiful in its time.

There's a Switchfoot song that says, "Maybe redemption has stories to tell. Maybe forgiveness is right where you fell." God can use your story. You don't need to run from it or be ashamed of it anymore. Forgiveness is right in front of you. Restoration is right in front of you. Let God have your story, let him recreate it and make it into something beautiful.

As we prepare to take part in communion, I'd like you to think about a couple questions:

1. What can I confess to God right now?
2. Is there anything about my past I don't think he can use?
3. What kind of transformation would I most like to see?
 - A weight lifted
 - More joy
 - More compassion for other people's plight